



**Testimony of the American Heart Association
Stuart Berlow, State Government Relations Director
Montgomery County Council
FY21 Operating Budget Hearing
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As the Council faces very difficult budget decisions for Fiscal Year 2021, the American Heart Association encourages continued prioritization for implementation of projects included in the Master Bike Plan that promote equity. Now more than ever it is critical that we ensure all residents have greater access to safe bicycle infrastructure to travel where they need to go, including essential jobs, health care, or to access healthy food. We recommend a minimum appropriation of \$15 million to support these health equity priorities included in the Plan's Goal 3.

The American Heart Association aims to be a relentless force for a world of longer, healthier lives. The way our communities are designed is an important factor in residents' ability to be physically active, to achieve a healthy weight, and to reduce their risk for heart disease and other chronic conditions.

Therefore, we were pleased that the Master Bike Plan sets goals and objectives for:

- "Equal access to low-stress bicycling for all members of the community, including people with incomes below the average median income for Montgomery County"
- "The percentage of bicycle trips that can be made on a low-stress bicycling network in US census tracts where the median income is below 60 percent of the county average median income will be the same as or greater than the county overall." ⁱ

In order to achieve these ambitious health equity and social justice aims, it is essential that the county's budget emphasizes the needs of its most vulnerable and underserved residents, and promotes implementation of Master Plan projects that will support safe bike access for those who need it most. COVID-19 has exposed longstanding health disparities in our communities and providing more equitable bike access is one important step to help reverse these inequities.

The Plan's equity objectives and goals are critical in a sprawling region where residents, regardless of geography or income, may require bicycling for both recreation and transportation – especially now. The Bicycle Master Plan's implementation must ensure that all residents, regardless of where they live can safely bike in their communities and increase their safe transportation options.

Beyond creating a safer, more accessible bicycling infrastructure for all, the Master Bicycle Plan can be critical step in moving the needle for a healthier county and decreasing health disparities. The County has long been a leader in promoting health for all, but more can be done:

- Over 1,200 Montgomery County residents died from heart disease in 2016ⁱⁱ
- Almost 300 residents died from stroke in 2016ⁱ
- 53% of adults in Montgomery County are overweight or obeseⁱⁱⁱ
- 20% of teens in Montgomery County are overweight or obese ⁱⁱ
 - 30% of Latino teens and 26% of African American teens are overweight or obese, compared to only 12% of white teens

- 47% of adults and 17% of teens do not regularly engage in Physical Activity ⁱⁱ

These considerable disparities that have been exposed so tragically through COVID-19 reinforce the American Heart Association's emphasis on addressing social determinants of health as a key priority for building healthier communities. Prioritizing Master Bike Plan projects in low-income communities, connecting those residents to necessary services, and doing so in a safe, healthy way is essential to reducing and eliminating health disparities. Investing in implementation the Master Plan's Goal 3 and its related projects is an important step to doing so.

The American Heart Association applauds the Council and the Planning Department for so significantly promoting equity by establishing it as a goal in the Plan. However, without prioritizing the implementation of such ambitious goals, the vision will not be realized. The Bicycle Master Plan can support the County's efforts to build healthier lives while creating a more equitable system that can be accessed and enjoyed by all residents, regardless of their geography or financial circumstances.

While we recognize that difficult decisions will be necessary in the FY21 budget, the American Heart Association recommends a minimum investment of \$15 million to begin implementation of Goal 3 and Objective 3.1 of the Master Bike Plan. Low and moderate-income communities must be emphasized throughout the Plan's implementation to ensure greater health equity and more accessible travel for residents who need such access to safely bike and walk for essential transportation and to take steps to improve their heart health.

ⁱ <https://montgomeryplanning.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Bike-Plan-Approved-Defining-the-Vision.pdf>

ⁱⁱ https://health.maryland.gov/vsa/Documents/2016_Annual_Report.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.healthymontgomery.org/index.php?module=Indicators&controller=index&action=view&indicatorId=56&localeId=1259>